65p

THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

138

Shamanism
Haunted Penkaet castle?
Peter Hurkos challenged
Joanna Southcott's box
Betty Hill's star map

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THE Unexplained
MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

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Contents

Shamanism
TO HELL AND BACK 2741
Mysterious illnesses, spiritual journeys, ordeals – and enlightenment; we investigate the secrets of the shaman
Francis King

Betty and Barney Hill
MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME 2746
Under hypnosis the Hills describe being abducted by aliens – and Betty draws a star map showing their 'home'
Hilary Evans

Great hauntings
A SENSE OF SOMETHING STRANGE 2750
Odd sounds, stains that appear and disappear, and other weird events; we report haunted Penkaet Castle
Archie Roy

Peter Hurkos
LESS SENSITIVE BY HALF? 2754
We take a long hard look at the alleged psychic powers of one of the world's most famous 'sensitives'
Piet Hein Hoebens

Joanna Southcott
SOUTHCOTT: TAKING THE LID OFF 2758
The Southcottians continue to behave strangely – and promise world peace if only we can find, and open, a box . . .
Frank Smyth

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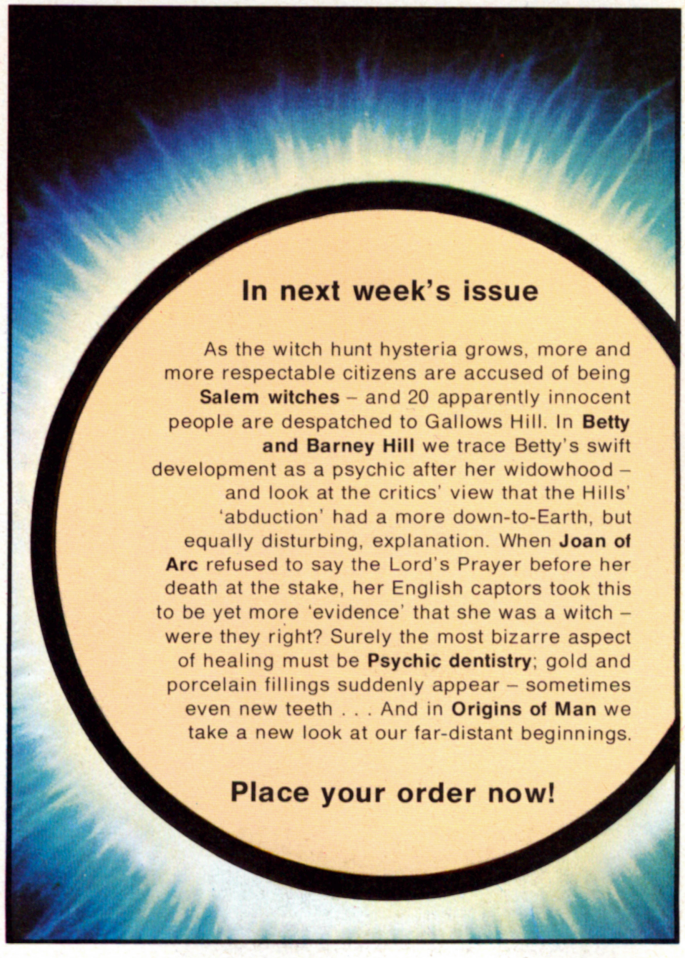
In next week's issue
As the witch hunt hysteria grows, more and more respectable citizens are accused of being **Salem witches** – and 20 apparently innocent people are despatched to Gallows Hill. In **Betty and Barney Hill** we trace Betty's swift development as a psychic after her widowhood – and look at the critics' view that the Hills' 'abduction' had a more down-to-Earth, but equally disturbing, explanation. When **Joan of Arc** refused to say the Lord's Prayer before her death at the stake, her English captors took this to be yet more 'evidence' that she was a witch – were they right? Surely the most bizarre aspect of healing must be **Psychic dentistry**; gold and porcelain fillings suddenly appear – sometimes even new teeth . . . And in **Origins of Man** we take a new look at our far-distant beginnings.
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To hell and back

The shaman – medicine man, priest and traveller in the spirit world – is the central figure of many primitive tribes. FRANCIS KING examines the rituals – and the role played by trance – in this worldwide phenomenon

'I SPENT THREE YEARS living in hell.' These were the words with which a Siberian shaman of the Buriat tribe began recounting the story of his life to the Russian anthropologist A. A. Popov.

The shaman was not speaking figuratively, or using the kind of exaggerated metaphor that is sometimes used to describe unpleasant experiences. He was claiming that he had, quite literally, spent three years in the underworld in the company of ghosts and evil spirits. Such claims are by no means unusual among shamans – tribal healers, magicians and mediums. Shamanistic beliefs flourish in every part of the world where primitive tribes still exist, from Siberia to South America, from Greenland to Indonesia. While each of these religions has its own gods, its own mythology and its own cosmology, they all share one vital characteristic. The central human actor in every one of them is a shaman, a man or woman who has personally undergone spiritual experiences that have brought him or her into direct contact with the supernatural.

Below left: a shaman mask from the Siberian tribe of Evenk, or Tungus. The mask was worn by the shaman in order to make him unrecognisable to hostile spirits as he travelled through the spirit world

Below: a shaman burial of the Tlingit Indian tribe, unearthed in 1970 on Prince of Wales Island, Alaska, USA. It consisted of four boxes of cedar wood, containing all the tools the shaman needed, including dolls with broken limbs and a mask of a strangled man, for working magic

It is usual for these experiences to begin with some personal crisis. Sometimes they take place entirely within the mind. For example, the future shaman may undergo a long period of moodiness and withdrawal, the sort of personality disorder that Western psychiatrists might diagnose as 'depression'. On other occasions, however, the crisis is brought on by a purely physical event – such as being struck by lightning or falling from a tall tree.

The crisis undergone by the shaman who told Popov that he had 'spent three years in hell' was of the latter variety. He first came into contact with the supernatural, so he averred, while suffering from a severe attack of some feverish disease that, from the description he gave, appears to have been a

violent attack of smallpox.

At the most acute stage of his illness the future shaman fell into a trance of such depth that the members of his tribe took it for death and, on the third day of the entrancement, began to prepare the supposed corpse for burial. While these preparations were taking place the sick man suddenly recovered consciousness and evidently wanted to speak. When he eventually managed to do so, he told his friends that he had been 'in the spirit world' and, while there, had undergone various initiations and received from divine beings instruction in healing and other mysterious arts. He was now capable, so he said, of healing the sick, communicating with the gods and guiding the souls of the dead through the unfamiliar territory of the spirit world. In short, he had become a fully fledged shaman.

The long account given by the shaman of his experiences while in trance implies that the spirit world he visited apparently has its own time scale, quite different from that of the world of everyday existence. For while the shaman was unconscious for only three earthly days, during that time he spent several years, so he said, with gods and demons.

When he became unconscious, he told Popov, he was carried down into the underworld, where he not only saw souls in torment but encountered and overcame many malignant demons. Having passed through these afflictions – trials that he may have believed were imposed by the gods in order to test the man's fitness for the exalted status of shamanship – he was mysteriously transported to a magic island.

Far right: a painting from the journals of Father Nicolas Point, who lived as a Roman Catholic missionary among the Indians of the Rocky Mountains of the United States between 1840 and 1847. Its caption reads: 'One becomes a medicine man only after making a pilgrimage during which he [sic] prays fervently, fasts from four to eight days, and eventually receives a "sign" from a bear, a red deer, a green ram, or perhaps even from a monster'

Right: an Evenk wooden fetish figure with blue bead eyes, from Siberia. The figure represents the person at whom some shamanistic spell is directed

Below: a thunderbird headdress used in winter dance rituals by a secret society, and collected in Kwakiuti, Alert Bay, British Columbia, in about 1920. It is thought highly likely that the ecstatic activities that once characterised shamanism survive in the mystical and secret societies that flourish among North American Indians today

On this island stood a birch tree, its roots extending down into hell, its topmost branches winding amid the stars. This tree, which sounds remarkably similar to Yggdrasill, the ash tree that supports the Universe in Scandinavian mythology, was the property of 'the Lord of the Earth', an awesome being who looked benignly upon the future shaman and gave him a drum made from the wood of the wondrous tree. This gift was of great significance. For the use of a magic drum is a

central feature in many Siberian shamanistic rituals performed for healing and other purposes; by giving the entranced man a drum, the god was symbolically conferring shamanship upon him in an act analogous to the Western European 'tradition of the instruments' – the presentation to a Catholic priest, as part of the sacrament of Orders, of the cup and paten, or communion plate, with which he will carry out the daily sacrifice of the mass.

From the island, Popov's informant travelled to a mountain, where he was killed, chopped in pieces, boiled in a cauldron for three years and, after being supplied with a new head forged for him on an anvil by a supernatural blacksmith, brought back to life. The gods then instructed him in healing, mediumship and other magical arts. His initiation into shamanship was over.

Above: a shaman costume from the Buriat tribe of Siberia and (left) a Buriat tribesman utters incantations to the sound of a drum, whose inner surface is decorated with a fetish figure. The photograph was taken in the 1930s; shamanism is now, as then, very much a living tradition in Siberia

While it would be absurd to believe this shaman's account to be literally true, there is no reason to believe that he was lying. For it seems clear that during his illness he subjectively underwent a similar pattern of experiences to those ceremonially undergone by the initiates of almost all formalised religio-magical cults, from the mysteries of the ancient world to the Golden Dawn (see page 2228) and other 19th-century occult fraternities.

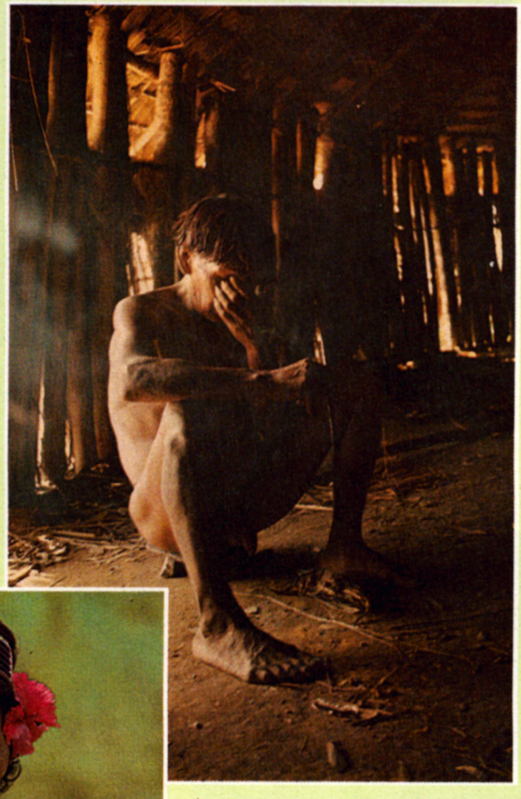
Outward and visible sign

In this age-old pattern there can be discerned three sharply defined elements. First, the person undergoing initiation is subjected to various tests and comes into contact with either good or evil spirits, or both. Then he or she suffers a ritual death. Lastly comes a spiritual resurrection to a new and much altered existence. Most primitive faiths of the shamanistic family embody some kind of ritual that gives an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual death and resurrection undergone by the shaman while in trance.

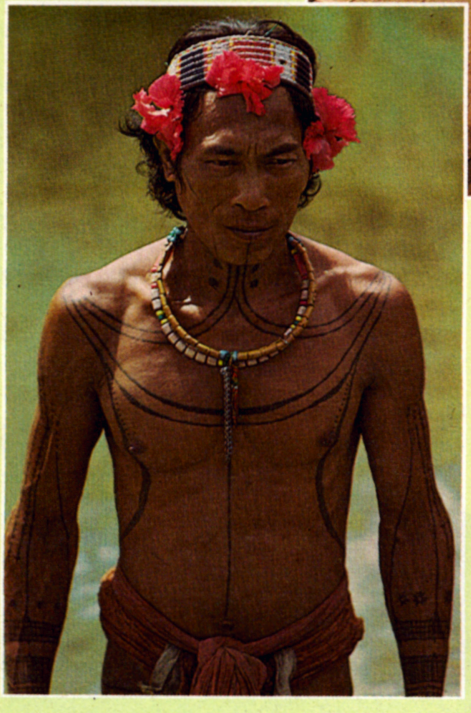
Thus the Buriat tribe of Siberia publicly ratifies the status of those recognised as shamans by means of a ceremony begun in the shaman's dwelling place. This is a Siberian yurt – that is, a felt or skin tent, entrance to it normally being via a crude ladder or rope lowered through the central smoke hole.

The rite begins when a small but sturdy birch tree is uprooted and taken to the yurt. Once there, it is firmly set up inside the dwelling, its roots and lower trunk being buried in the earth beneath the hearth, its trunk rising through the smoke hole immediately above the hearth and its topmost branches soaring high into the air above the yurt. This tree is a material analogue to the magical birch, the property of the Lord of the

Cult figures



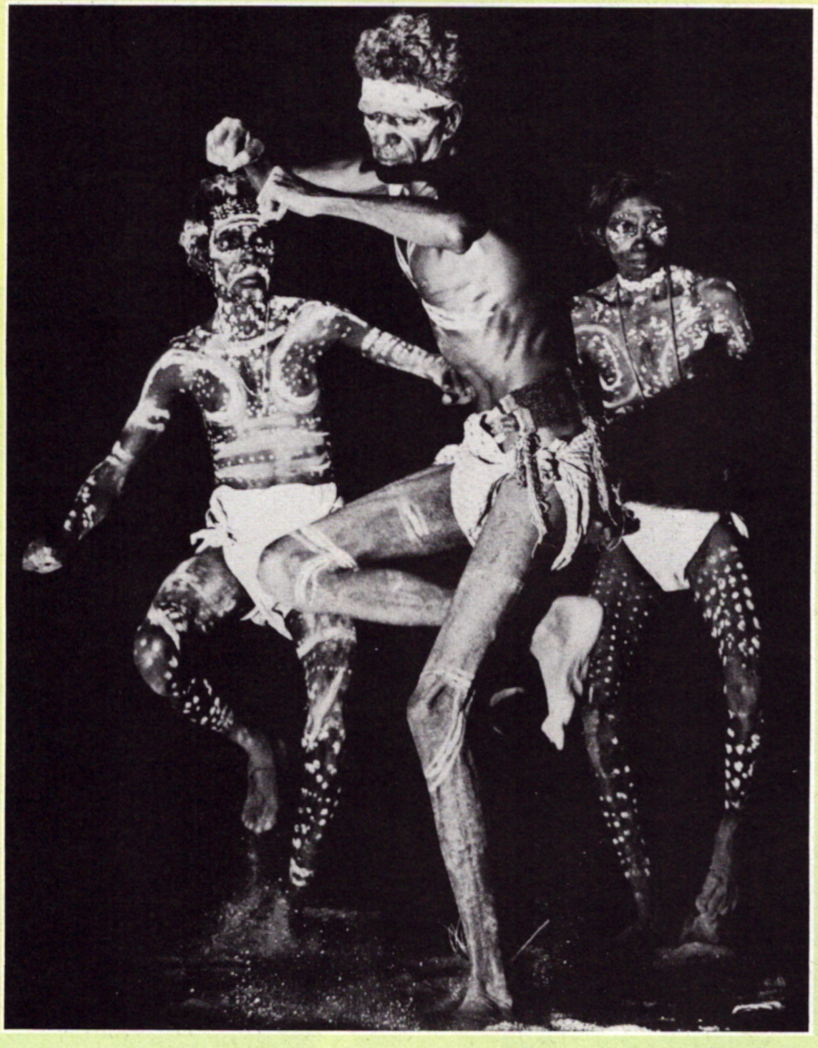
Shamans of the world: a Brazilian shaman communes with the spirit world (right); a Siberut shaman from Indonesia (below); and Australian aborigine shamans take part in an ecstatic dance (bottom)



The religious phenomenon of shamanism is generally associated with tribes living in Siberia, among whom it was first studied; the word shaman itself is derived from the Siberian Tungus *saman*. But in fact shamanism is to be found throughout the world – in forms that are strikingly similar.

The characteristic ability of shamans the world over is the capacity to leave the body at will – to have out-of-the-body experiences (see page 101). This enables the shaman to hold discourse with supernatural beings, to heal the sick by returning their errant souls to their bodies, and to escort the souls of the departed to the afterworld. In the shamanism of the Buriat tribe of Siberia, the shaman can traverse the seven hells to ask favours of the Lord of the Underworld; in an oddly parallel ritual of Eskimo shamanism, the shaman undertakes a voyage to the bottom of the ocean, to the Mother of the Seals, to ask her for food in time of famine.

The universal pattern of initiation as a shaman is of death followed by rebirth. Generally the gift of shamanism is passed on through heredity, or may be acquired through an event that is regarded by the community as supernatural; sometimes, however, a member of the tribe may simply decide to be a shaman, or be elected by his fellows. Shamans of this kind are generally regarded by their tribes as inferior, but in North America it is quite normal for the would-be shaman to set off on a quest for magical powers. Nowhere, however, is the experience of shamanistic ecstasy in trance enough to confirm the initiate as a shaman; he is recognised as such only after a period of instruction, from one or more master-shamans, in the religious traditions of the tribe, and in how to recognise and treat diseases by non-'magical' means.



Right: an alchemy master and his assistants prepare ingredients for the transmutation of metals, in an illustration from the late 15th-century *Norton's ordinall*. There are some interesting parallels between the death and rebirth rituals of shamanistic initiation and the alchemical process: in alchemy, the base metal – symbolising the soul of the alchemist – is subjected to various forms of chemical 'degradation' until it darkens in colour, symbolising its death. Only then, through the application of the Philosopher's Stone, can the metal – or the spiritual state of the alchemist – become transmuted into pure gold

Earth, from which the mystic drum given to Popov's shaman during trance was made.

After the tree has been correctly positioned, the shaman takes a sword or other weapon in his right hand and, ascending through the smoke hole of the yurt, climbs to the topmost branches of the birch. He thus signifies that he lives in two worlds, the ordinary world of men, symbolised by the yurt, and the spirit world, symbolised by the crown of the tree. From his lofty perch, which signifies that his consciousness has been raised to the level of that of the gods, the shaman solemnly invokes the world of the supernatural and calls upon it to aid him in his healing and other spiritual activities.

Under the guidance of a senior shaman, the candidate is then conducted in solemn procession to remote and unfrequented wilderness in which a group of birch tree-trunks has been erected to form a traditional pattern. This pattern is normally circular or elliptical, and it seems possible that the use of a similar arrangement of tree-trunks for religio-magical purposes may once have been worldwide; indeed, there seems little reason to doubt that sophisticated structures such as Stonehenge and other megalithic monuments were developments of this type of timber 'temple'.

At the birch-tree temple an animal, usually a goat, is sacrificed and the orifices of the candidate's head are smeared with its blood. This is a magical action, intended to ensure that the shaman will see and hear with the eyes and ears of the gods and speak with their voices, for the act of sacrifice makes the victim the property of the gods, and every part of its body, but especially the blood, partakes of their divine nature. This blood, as far as the shaman is concerned, has become a supernatural substance that will bring all his senses into contact with the spirits.

The shaman in charge of the proceedings then climbs a birch tree using a 'ladder' of nine notches, symbolising the nine heavens of Siberian mythology and the states of ecstasy supposedly corresponding with them. The candidate follows the master shaman's example and then climbs eight more birch trees. On climbing each tree, the candidate goes – or at least appears to go – into deeper and deeper trance as he progressively ascends the tree. On each of his returns to Earth he reverts to normal consciousness. The public ratification of his status as shaman is over.

On page 2786: the nature of shamanistic healing, trance and possession

Below: Stonehenge, the megalithic monument that stands on Salisbury Plain. Part of the initiation ceremony of Buriat shamans is conducted in a 'temple' of sacred birch trees, usually arranged in a circular or elliptical pattern; and it has been suggested that sophisticated structures such as Stonehenge and other megalithic monuments may be developments of this type of shamanistic temple

Making up for lost time

Sensational information about 'alien visitors' emerged when Betty and Barney Hill's memories of their close encounter were probed by hypnosis. HILARY EVANS describes the Hills' revelations – which included the aliens' interstellar navigation chart

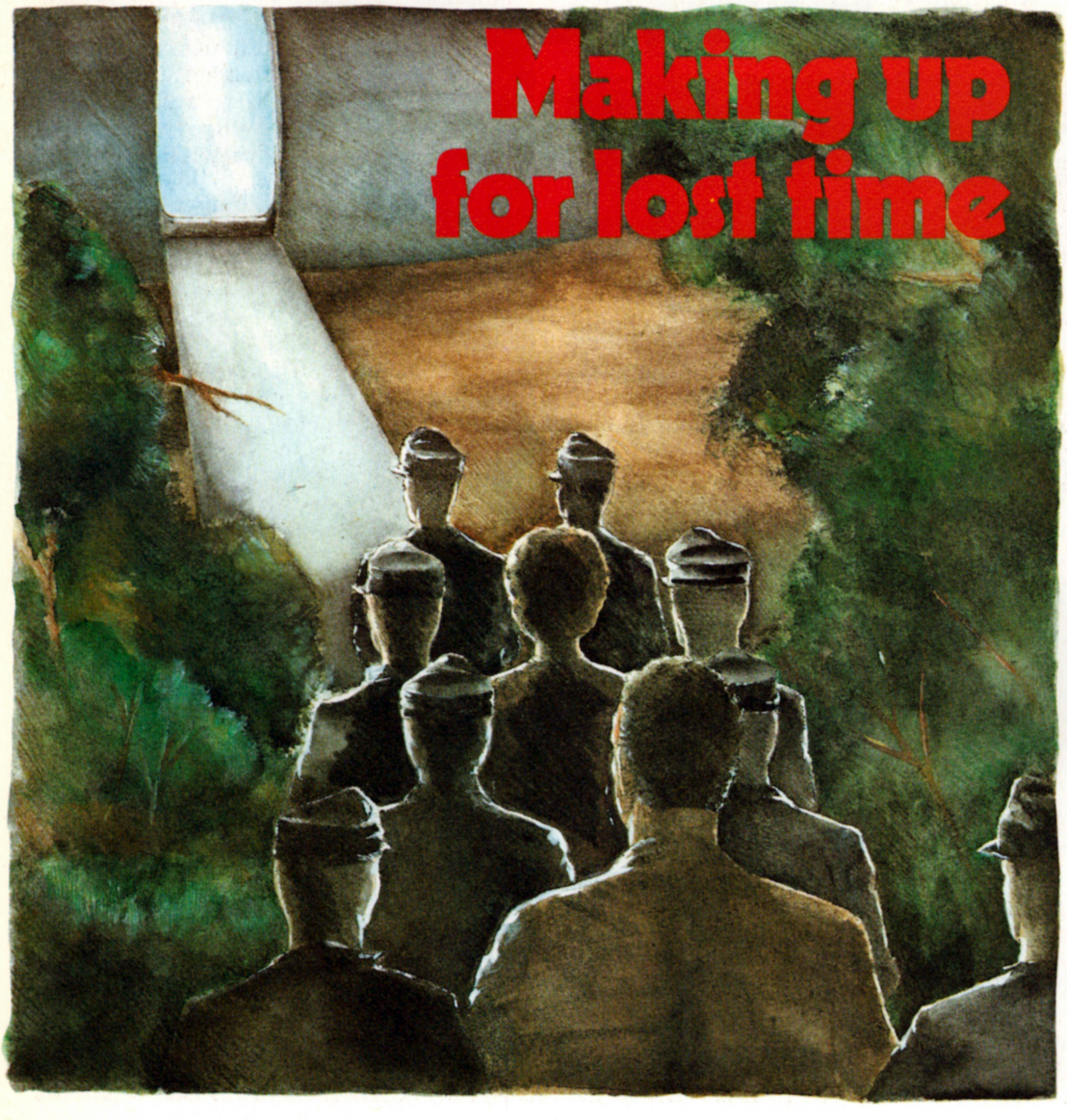
BARNEY AND BETTY HILL presented themselves at the office of Dr Benjamin Simon on 14 December 1963 to begin a series of hypnosis sessions that was to last seven months. Dr Simon was a practitioner of experience and repute, ideally suited for the task; his open-minded attitude enabled the troubled couple to present their stories in an atmosphere of sympathetic understanding, free from bias or prejudice.

It is important to remember why hypnosis was tried. In Betty's words:

> We went to Dr Simon to get relief from the emotional trouble, and to determine what its cause was. In other words, we'd gone for medical help, not to find out about a UFO experience.

And the sessions were not part of a wider course of psychoanalysis: they were designed to see what relevance the alleged UFO sighting might have to Barney's physical and psychological state. So they do not give us a general picture of Barney's or Betty's psychological background. There are many questions we would like answered about the couple, about their attitudes to such matters as their interracial marriage, their previous marriages, their separation from their children, their involvement with social work and civil rights, all of which could have some bearing on how we evaluate their stories. But no such information is forthcoming: Dr Simon's probing, and his subsequent comments, were limited to the task in hand.

Each subject was hypnotised separately, with the other out of the room, one after the other. They did not hear each other's sessions at the time, nor the tapes of their own sessions. Only when Dr Simon judged that he had accomplished all he could and had brought the sessions to an end did he invite the couple to hear the tapes for the first time.



Above: Betty and Barney Hill, heads slumped, under hypnosis during their seven-month course of treatment. Their hypnotherapist, Dr Benjamin Simon (right), was concerned with 'the cumulative impact of past experiences and fantasies on their present experiences and responses' – not with the existence of UFOs. In an introduction to the published account of the case he is careful to say that hypnosis is a pathway to the truth 'as it is felt and understood by the patient'

Left: Betty and Barney are led to the mysterious craft by members of its crew. Betty felt great fear at this point – but Barney later insisted that he felt none

They chose to listen to them together.

All this was being done at the Hills' own instigation and, moreover, at their own expense. Apart from the emotional ordeal, seven months of sessions with a consultant of the highest qualifications must have cost a very great sum of money. There must have been an exceedingly strong motivation to encourage the Hills to shoulder such costs.

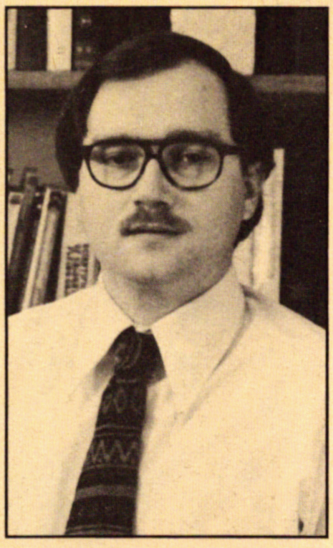
Under hypnosis the Hills independently told a story that matched the dreams that had so troubled Betty in the weeks following their supposed sighting. But with this difference: the histories were now recounted as the experiences of two people, each describing the events as seen from his or her individual viewpoint. During the phases of the story when the couple were together, each account confirmed the other; when they were separated, they had their own stories to tell, and told them with an immediacy and intensity that give a vivid impression of re-living an actual experience. Here is Barney:

> I started to get out of my car, and put one foot on the ground. And two men were standing beside me, helping me out. I felt very relaxed, yet very frightened. They didn't say anything. I knew I was walking, or moving down the road from the position of where my car was parked. And I could see the ramp that I went up. . . . I could hear a humming sound that they seemed to be making. I was afraid to open my eyes. I had been told not to open my eyes, and it would be over with quickly. And I could feel them examining me with their hands. They looked at my neck, and I could feel them touching my skin right down my back. As if they were counting my spinal column. And I felt something touch right at the base of my spine, like a finger pushing, a single finger.

Betty's account was equally detailed:

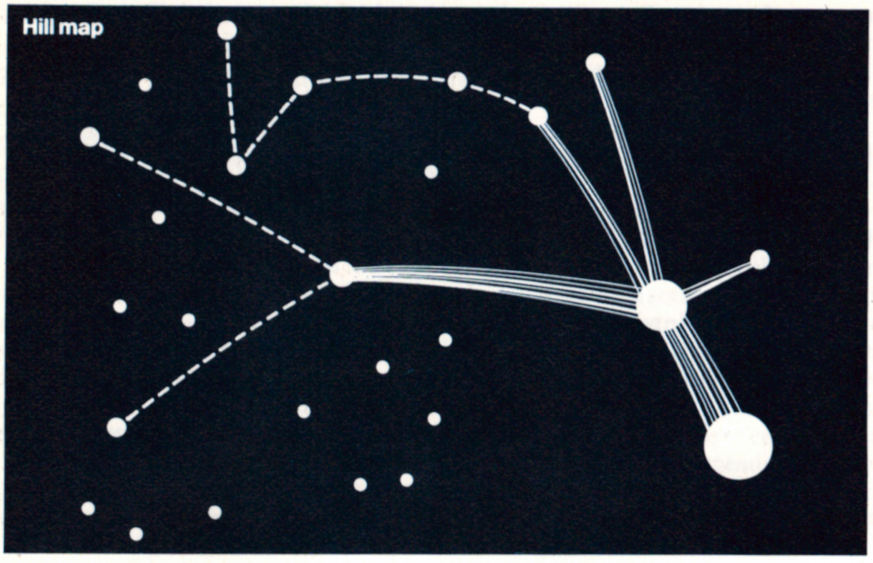
> They led Barney right past the door where I'm standing. So I said: 'What are you doing with Barney? Bring him in here where I am.' And the man said: 'No, we only have equipment enough in one room to do one person at a time. And if we took you both in the same room, it would take too long. So Barney will be all right, they're going to take him into the next room. And then as soon as we get through testing the both of you, then you will go back to your car. You don't have to be afraid.' . . . And they rub – they have a machine, I don't know what it is. They bring the machine over and they put it – it's something like a microscope, only with a big lens. I had an idea they were taking a picture of my skin. And they both looked through this machine. . . . Then they took something like a letter opener and they scraped my arm here,

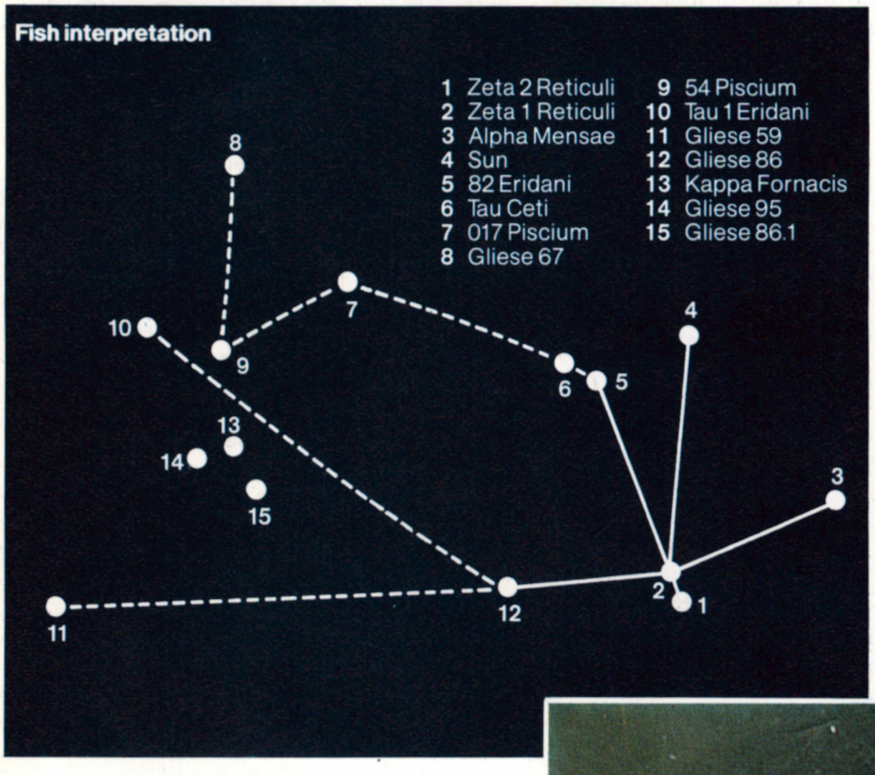
Merely starstruck?



The American UFO sceptic Robert Sheaffer (right) has declared that the Hills' experience began when they misidentified the planet Jupiter as a UFO. Betty first saw a bright 'star' near the Moon; later a second one appeared and seemed to be moving. Jupiter and Saturn *were* visible near the Moon that night: had there been a UFO, Sheaffer says, Betty would have seen *three* 'stars'. Having satisfied himself on this point, Sheaffer dismisses Betty's other claims – such as that the UFO acted 'much like a yo-yo', had passed in front of the Moon in silhouette and flashed 'thin pencils of different-coloured lights, rotating around an object which at that time appeared cigar-shaped'. He cites other cases in which witnesses have produced fantastic misinterpretations of bright stars.

Sheaffer further questions the Hills' 'loss' of two hours. At various times the Hills have put the UFO encounter as occurring at around 11 p.m., between midnight and 1 a.m., and at around 3 a.m. Furthermore, Barney recalled that, as the UFO approached them, he drove extremely slowly; on the homeward journey he stopped at least once, for reasons he couldn't remember. Sheaffer insists that there is so much uncertainty in the times and in their speed of travel that there is no reason to believe in the 'loss' of the two hours – a loss that was 'discovered' only weeks later.





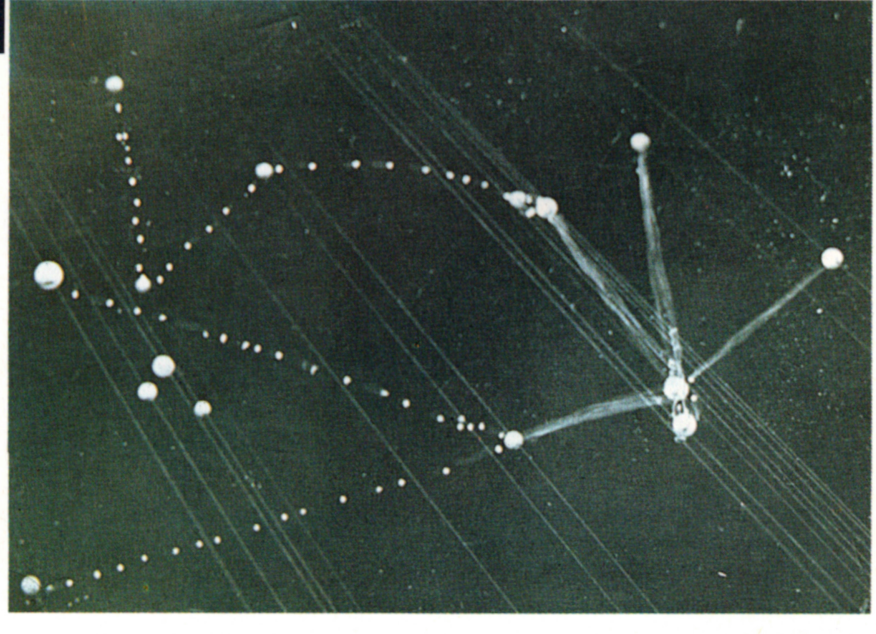
I asked him where he was from. Because I said that I knew he wasn't from the Earth . . . and he asked if I knew anything about the Universe. And I told him no. I knew practically nothing. . . . And he went across the room . . . there was an opening. And he pulled out a map. . . . It was an oblong map. . . . And there were all these dots on it. . . . Some were little, just pinpoints. And others were as big as a nickel . . . there were curved lines going from one dot to another. And there was one big circle, and it had a lot of lines coming out from it. A lot of lines going to another circle quite close but not as big. . . . And I asked him what they meant. And he said that the heavy lines were trade routes . . . the solid lines were places they went occasionally. And he said the broken lines were expeditions. . . . So I asked him where was his home port, and he said, 'Where were you on the map?' I looked and laughed and said, 'I don't know.' So he said, 'If you don't know where you are, then there isn't any point of my telling where I am from.' And he put the map . . . back in the space in the wall. . . .

Betty drew the map to the best of her recollection, but with no names and no points of reference it was totally meaningless. However, in 1968 a schoolteacher and amateur astronomer, Marjorie Fish, realised that there must be a limited number of actual configurations of stars that would match up to the points of the map. She started by making a three-dimensional model of Betty's map out of beads and string and then set about seeking a match for it among the not-too-distant stars. After five years, she felt satisfied that she had found such a match.

The Fish map started a controversy almost as lively as that engendered by the Hills'

and there was like little – you know how your skin gets dry and flaky sometimes, like little particles of skin? And they put something like a piece of cellophane or plastic, they scraped, and they put this that came off on this plastic.

One of the practical applications of hypnosis is to bring into the conscious mind information that is stored in the subconscious – things experienced but not consciously noted by the witness. This was used to good effect by Dr Simon in the case of the star map Betty Hill said she had been shown by the 'leader' of the aliens. Dr Simon suggested that after the session, when she got home, she might care to try to draw what she remembered of the map. For, to judge from her account, it could be a valuable clue as to the origin of her abductors. In the session she said:



Opposite: the home of the aliens? Betty Hill recalled being shown a star map something like this (top). The stars, seen from an unknown viewpoint, form unfamiliar patterns. A school teacher, Marjorie Fish, after several years' work arrived at this interpretation (centre). The aliens' home system, zeta 1 Reticuli, is about 37 light years from us. Marjorie Fish arrived at her result by making a model of stars near the Sun, using beads mounted on threads (bottom)

original sighting. An astronomer, Terence Dickinson, was favourably impressed and presented the case for the Fish model in an authoritative article:

> Basically the Fish interpretation is a view from a few light years beyond the stars zeta 1 and zeta 2 Reticuli, looking back towards the Sun and the star 82 Eridani, which is about midway between us and the Reticuli pair. The 15 stars shown on the map are all basically like the Sun and could theoretically have planets like Earth. These are the types of stars some astronomers are currently examining in search of signals from alien intelligences. It is therefore a reasonable assumption that this type of star may be the only type on the map. . . . No other interpretation of the Hill map includes all of the solar-type stars within a specific area of space containing the Sun . . . and makes sense in terms of logical travel between the stars.

Above: the Hills' first close-up view of the aliens as they approached the couple's stalled car. This careful reconstruction of Betty and Barney's descriptions appeared in the UFO magazine *Flying Saucer* after their case had caught the public's imagination

The Fish model provoked much debate, largely related to the chances of finding such a pattern at random among the numerous stars in the neighbourhood of the Sun. By way of testing this, Charles W. Atterberg offered an alternative conjecture as to the region shown in the map. It is a measure of how debatable the findings are that the UFO sceptic Robert Sheaffer should find the Atterberg model superior to the Fish version, whereas Dickinson claims that it is more arbitrary in its selection of stars and contains several inconsistencies.

Additional support for the Fish model appeared in 1969, when a revised star catalogue, containing information that was simply not available in 1961, was published for the first time and confirmed predictions made by Fish on the basis of the Hill map. Though this is still not definite proof, it is strongly supportive of the Hill-Fish suggestion. But the question remains of how much reliance can be placed on the recollections, by someone totally unversed in astronomy, of a map seen – under distinctly bizarre conditions – more than two years earlier.

The star map is the most tangible aspect of the Hill case, and lends itself to testing. For the rest, it is a matter of evaluating the Hills' personal testimony, and in the complete absence of any physical evidence – how valuable the book that Betty was offered would have been, if she had only been allowed to bring it away! – evaluation is limited to assessing the credibility of the Hills themselves. No critic has questioned their honesty and sincerity; rather it is their interpretation of their experience that is questioned. It is in this respect that our lack of information about the Hills' personal background becomes important. For, without questioning either their integrity or their intelligence, it is clear that there are factors in the Hills' personal circumstances that could be relevant to the way we judge their story. We have already noted such external factors as their mixed marriage, their previous marriages, Barney's state of health; there is also considerable evidence to show that Betty was a much more unusual person than she is presented as in, for instance, John G. Fuller's book *The interrupted journey*. (It is only fair to Fuller to say that much of this has come to light only after the publication of his book.)

Mixed blessings of fame

Barney Hill died in February 1969, five years after the sessions with Dr Simon: he died of a cerebral haemorrhage, as did his father before him. Since then, Betty has enjoyed the mixed blessings of fame. Her case has been featured in books and magazines, even presented as a full-length movie. She has made countless public appearances at lectures and conferences and as a guest on radio and television shows. Some time after the hypnotic sessions, she gave up her work and devoted herself full-time to 'UFO research'. She has become something of a celebrity, recognised on the most unlikely occasions:

> At a recent lobster festival the man on the mike looked up, saw me and said: 'Welcome, Betty Hill! You've put us on the map with the greatest landing area for UFOs in the world!'

Cynically, one could say that she now has a vested interest in having people believe that her experience was genuine, but there seems little question that she is completely sincere in her belief that the abduction really took place.

However, she is no less convinced that a great number of strange events have happened to her since the alleged abduction.

Betty Hill sees more UFOs and experiences psychic happenings: see page 2778

A sense of something strange

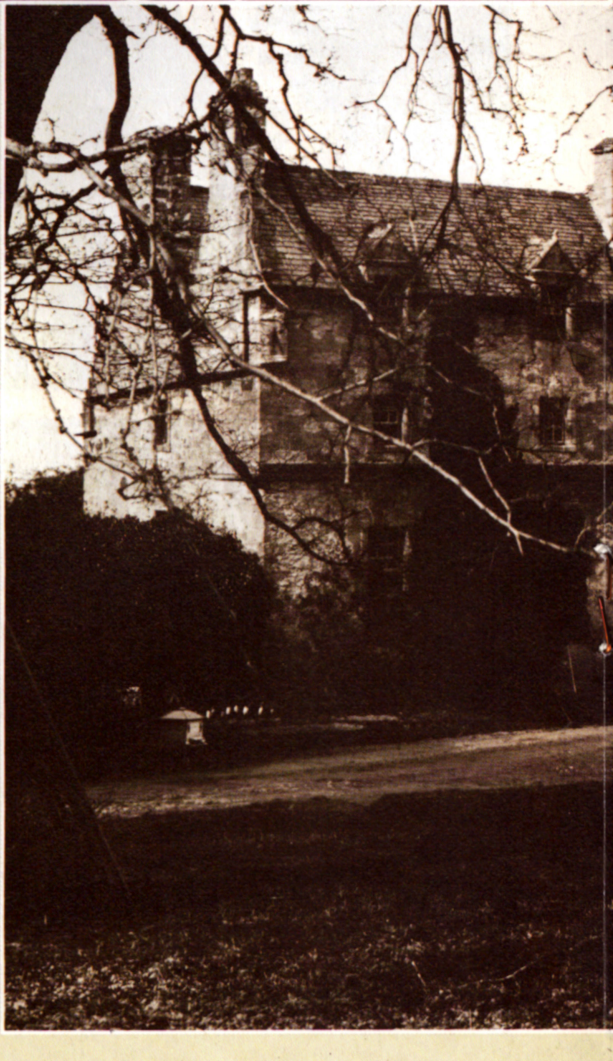
Shrieks, groans, heavy footsteps and the uncanny sound of something being dragged along the floor made nights at a lonely Scottish castle a terrifying experience for the occupants. No rational explanation for the phenomena has ever been found, as ARCHIE ROY relates

ON A WINDY WEEKEND in March 1946 a party of students gathered at Penkaet Castle in Scotland to rehearse a play they intended to perform at Edinburgh College of Art. After the first day of rehearsal on Saturday, supper was served and the party retired to bed. Two of the girls, Susan Hart and Carol Johnstone, were put in the King Charles room, so called because it contained a massive carved four-poster bed, reputedly slept in by Charles II.

On either side of the bed a candle burned, throwing long shadows in the cavernous room. Although there was an oil heater, it was extremely cold, so cold that the girls found it impossible to get to sleep.

About midnight both girls heard a sound, which they said was like 'something trundling across the floor above', or 'something going down a slope'. The strange sound was

Left: a 17th-century painting (from the studio of John Michael Wright) of King Charles II, now in the National Portrait Gallery, London. Because a massive carved bed had reputedly been slept in by Charles II, the room containing it was known as the King Charles room. Many of the paranormal happenings at Penkaet Castle (right) were connected with this room



Left: the four-poster bed in the main bedroom of Penkaet Castle had been a present from students to Professor Holbourn, who bought the castle in 1923. The masks on either side of the bottom of the bed were said to be replicas of the death mask of Charles I, and the bed had been used by his son Charles II. On several occasions the bedclothes were found rumpled as if the bed had been slept in, even though no one had been in the room

repeated from time to time, and they also heard footsteps.

About 2 a.m. a new phenomenon was presented to them. On the wall opposite the bed they noticed a large, dark brown stain. It was on the right-hand side of the fireplace, giving the impression that part of the paper had come away from the wall and was now hanging down. The following night, to their surprise, the patch had disappeared. Although the girls experimented with the candles in an attempt to produce a shadow of the same shape and position, they were unsuccessful.

This was not the first time that Penkaet Castle had been the scene of inexplicable manifestations. Dating from the beginning of the 16th century, the castle stands near Haddington, Lothian. It is virtually unmodernised and retains many of its historic furnishings. There is a legend that a former owner, John Cockburn, killed his relative John Seton, and his troubled conscience causes his ghost to haunt the place. Another former owner, Sir Andrew Dick Lauder, had, as a boy of nine, seen a ghost standing before the fireplace in one of the rooms.

In the early 1920s the castle was bought by Professor and Mrs Holbourn, who soon began to experience strange phenomena. 'When we first came here in 1923,' Mrs Holbourn was reported as saying in the *Journal* of the American Society for Psychical Research,

> we were often disturbed by the sounds of heavy footsteps going about the house, and the sound of something heavy and soft being dragged along. Various people who occupied the house [in our absence] complained of hearing shrieks and groans, and that doors which were shut and even locked at night were found open in the morning. One girl was so terrified that she refused to sleep alone.

Sometimes, when Professor and Mrs Holbourn found the noises too persistent and annoying, the professor would admonish 'John', telling him he was behaving childishly and asking him to stop. The sounds would cease at once.

Music and movement

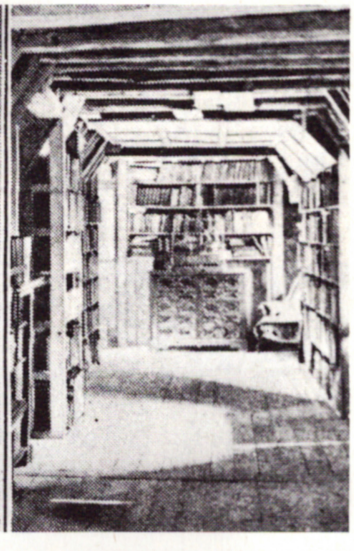
While carols were being sung in the music room at Christmas 1923, a piece of wood carved with the family crest was seen to lean forward from the wall, 'hesitate' and then return to its former position. Two years later, a friend occupied the room containing the King Charles bed, and heard someone moving about on the ground floor during the night. She and the professor searched downstairs but could find no one. On their return to the first floor, they heard from the room above the sound of someone turning over in the bed the girl had left.

Ten years later when a Mrs Carstairs, recuperating from an illness, was sleeping in the King Charles bed, Mrs Holbourn's brother, who was in the room below, was wakened by urgent knocks apparently coming from overhead. Thinking that Mrs Carstairs had fallen out of bed and was knocking for help, he woke Mrs Holbourn; she found the lady sleeping soundly in her bed.

Other people (including Professor and Mrs Holbourn) spending the night in the bedroom below the King Charles room heard the sounds of movement from the room above when it was supposed to be empty. Sometimes it sounded as if the furniture was being moved around, and at other times it sounded as if someone was 'stumbling and groping about the room'.

In 1924 a cousin was staying in the house while the Holbourns were away. One day he took a visitor up to see the King Charles bed and, when they entered the room, they found the bedclothes ruffled as if the bed had not been made. The cousin mentioned this to the gardener's daughter Mrs Anderson (whose job it was to make the beds), and she expressed surprise, maintaining that she had in fact made the King Charles bed that very

In March 1946, when a party of students spent the night at Penkaet, young Mr Holbourn and his wife slept in the dining room (left) and Mrs Holbourn senior occupied the music room (bottom). All three were kept awake far into the night by loud, unexplained noises. Later in the year, in July, members of an East Lothian society visited the house; while they were in the library (below) a glass dome covering a model of Penkaet suddenly disintegrated (below, left)



morning. The incident was dismissed – until it happened again. The cousin took another visitor up to the room, this time someone who wanted to photograph the bed. Again the bedclothes were found to be disarranged, and again Mrs Anderson had to remake the bed. The visitor took his photograph and left; he returned a day or so later to say that the photograph had been under-exposed. When he and the Holbourns' cousin went up to the bedroom so that he could re-photograph the bed, they found that once again the bedclothes had been pulled about. This time, after Mrs Anderson had put the bedclothes straight, the cousin took the precaution of locking the two doors leading into the room and checking that the windows were secure. He also placed two bricks against the main door. The following day the bricks had been moved and the bedclothes were again disarranged. At the time these strange occurrences took place, the cousin was the only person living in the house.

Another incident that took place in the same room concerned a massive antique cabinet, which was very difficult to move. This was found 6 inches (15 centimetres) away from the wall. In addition, a brass jug and basin had been placed on top of the cabinet, and the jug was lying on its side.

In the summer of 1935 Professor Holbourn's son was working late one evening in the workshop on the ground floor. Although it was about 11 p.m. it was only just getting dark, and Mr Holbourn took the job he was working on outside to look at it in the fading light. While he was outside the housekeeper, Betta Leadbetter, came to the window to tell him that someone was taking a bath. She had heard the taps running, someone splashing about in the bath, and later the water running out. As his wife had been in bed since 9 p.m., Mr Holbourn decided to investigate. When he entered the bathroom he found it full of steam and the mirror and windows completely misted over, although the bath itself was quite dry. No one in the house admitted to having used the bath. The most bizarre feature of this incident concerned the soap. At the time it was customary for large houses to order soap by the half hundredweight (25 kilograms). The Penkaet Castle soap was all of one colour. What was found in the bathroom, however, was a square piece of white soap totally unlike the other soap in the house.

It is well known that domestic animals are acutely sensitive to paranormal phenomena, and another incident at Penkaet Castle bears this out. On the night of her husband's

Legend has it that a former owner of Penkaet Castle (above), one John Cockcroft, killed a relative, and that his troubled spirit haunts the place and is responsible for the strange noises and other unaccountable happenings that are so often reported there. At Christmas 1923, for instance, a piece of wood in the music room, carved with the family crest, was seen by several witnesses to lean forward from the wall, 'hesitate' perceptibly, and then return to its proper place

funeral, Mrs Holbourn senior said that she had heard footsteps coming down the path outside the house; she also heard the front door open and shut. When her eldest son investigated he could find nothing to account for the sounds. When he returned, the cat preceded him, showing every sign of being terrified. It took refuge under the table, lashing its tail from side to side.

On another occasion, Mr Holbourn heard a scratching sound at one of the two doors leading into the Middle Room. As the household possessed a Siamese cat at the time, Mr Holbourn went to open the door for it. To his astonishment, when he was about 3 feet (1 metre) from the door it suddenly swung wide open, and the door at the opposite end of the room did likewise. A curtain blew outwards, although there was no wind. As Mr Holbourn stood there, footsteps were heard down the passage.

Among the students who had come to Penkaet Castle to rehearse their play that weekend in March 1946 was Mrs Holbourn's son. Most members of the party arrived on the Saturday and after a rehearsal and supper they all retired to bed.

Because the house was so crowded, Mrs Holbourn senior occupied the music room that night; she heard, from somewhere above her, loud noises that continued until nearly 3 a.m. Her son and his wife spent the night in the dining room, and they too heard disturbing noises, so severe that they hardly slept at all. It sounded as if the other members of the group were rehearsing the play again, behaviour that seemed quite extraordinary at that time of night.

In the morning the two girls who had occupied the room above the music room were asked how they had slept. They had, they complained, been much disturbed by peculiar noises, but had tried to ignore them, thinking that perhaps someone was playing a trick on them.

When Carol and Susan, who had occupied the King Charles room, came down they told the others about the noises they had heard, and the ghastly stain they had seen on the wall. They wondered if William Brown (who had been in the room above theirs) had been playing a trick on them, but when he at last came down he said he had slept soundly.

Another member of the party, Margaret Stewart, had slept in the Long Room on the same floor as the King Charles room, sharing it with Carolyn Smith. She had also heard the trundling noise. She said that the room was very cold, and that she had the feeling that they were never quite alone.

The clock that would not go

Susan Hart had encountered another puzzling phenomenon. She had brought with her a clock, which had been in her possession ever since her schooldays and had never been known to go wrong. At Penkaet she wound it up, but found that it would not go for more than five minutes continuously during her stay at the castle, even though she tried to get it going several times. Mr Holbourn said that he had discovered that any clock placed on the wall between the dining room and the next room would not go. He had also tried hanging a watch on that wall, and it stopped.

Two of the girls, Carol Johnstone and Margaret Stewart, said that they had felt ill throughout their visit to the castle. All in all, it seemed that the weekend produced a number of strange and inexplicable events.

On 6 October 1946 a trustee of the Edinburgh Psychic College took a statement from Mrs Holbourn; he also interviewed most of the members of the rehearsal party in Edinburgh on 4 December the same year. William Brown sent a statement from his army camp on 28 January 1947 in which he said that on the Saturday night in question all he did after the party retired to bed was to go to the library to look for something to read, go to his room, undress, and lie in bed reading. He said he was asleep long before midnight.

On 29 July 1946 public attention was drawn to the 'entity' that had disturbed the party of young people in March the same year. It was the day that about 100 members of the East Lothian Antiquarian and Field Naturalists Society had an outing to the castle. In an upper gallery, used as a library, there was a glass dome that covered and protected a model of the house. The dome was about 2 feet (60 centimetres) high, and stood on an oval base about 20 inches (50 centimetres) long. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, and with no one anywhere near it, the glass dome shattered. Could this have been a hint from 'John Cockburn' that he was getting a bit tired of so many visitors?

Less sensitive by half?

Does Peter Hurkos have any genuine telepathic skills? To the Hollywood celebrities who queue up to see him the answer is a resounding 'yes'. But when PIET HEIN HOEBENS investigated the great man's claims he came up with some surprising conclusions

THE MEDIA LOVE PETER HURKOS – and so do the many Hollywood stars who go to him for paranormal counsel. 'That Hurkos ranges from 87 per cent to 99 per cent accuracy in his psychic projections is irrefutable,' the jacket of Norma Lee Browning's admiring biography *The psychic world of Peter Hurkos* proclaims. These figures – however they were arrived at – certainly look impressive. But what is the truth behind the statistics? Parapsychologists – with the exception of the remarkable Dr Andrija Puharich – rarely mention his name. Unlike his countryman Gerard Croiset (see page 2630), he never had the unqualified support of prominent university professors. What, then, is his record of success?

Peter Hurkos was born in the Netherlands as Pieter van der Hurk, but changed his name on emigrating to the United States, of which he is now a citizen, in the 1950s.

Many sensitives recall having had mysterious and inexplicable experiences since early childhood. Hurkos, however, was not born psychic. He acquired his sixth sense only in 1943, as a result of an accident. While he was painting an army barracks he fell from a ladder and had to be taken to a hospital in the Hague. When he regained consciousness he discovered that he now could see events that other people could not see, in distant places and in the future.

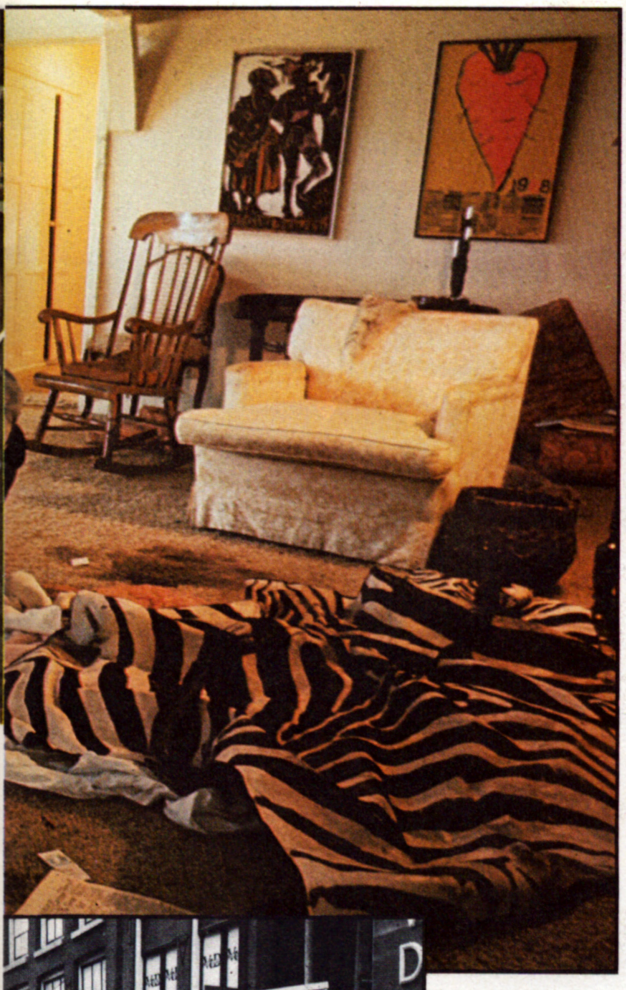
His first such vision concerned a fellow patient who was about to be released from the hospital in which Hurkos was staying. Hurkos just *knew* that the man was a British secret agent and would be shot by the Nazis on a crowded street, the Kalverstraat, within a couple of days. He tried frantically to warn the stranger, but the hospital staff thought he was hallucinating. But of course, everything happened as Hurkos had foreseen. The patient, who was indeed a British agent, was shot by the Gestapo on the street named by Hurkos, two days after the vision.

At least, that is what Hurkos and his biographers claim. And here we encounter the perennial problem in assessing anecdotal evidence for ESP. Some incidents seem inexplicable as reported. But can we rely on the reports? In the case of the doomed secret agent, there are compelling reasons for taking the story with a pinch of salt. No independent confirmation of the claim has ever been published. And the State Institute for War Archives in Amsterdam has no record of any British agent having been shot by the Germans in Kalverstraat between 10 July and 5 August 1943, in which period the incident must have occurred. It is scarcely conceivable that such an event would have escaped the notice of the state archivists. 'It is very improbable that this incident really took place,' the Institute replied to enquiries made in 1982.

Above: the Kalverstraat in Amsterdam, circa 1941. This was the scene of the events of Hurkos's first vision when, in 1943, he foresaw the murder of a fellow hospital patient by Nazi soldiers. Hurkos tried to alert hospital staff but the nurses ignored him, thinking he was hallucinating. Perhaps he was – since, despite the claim that his vision became reality two days later, no such incident is on record at the State Institute for War Archives in Amsterdam

Hurkos the hero

In his autobiography *Psychic: the story of Peter Hurkos*, the sensitive claims to have distinguished himself by all kinds of heroic acts as a member of the anti-fascist underground movement in Nazi-dominated Holland. His most spectacular feat concerns a friend in the Resistance, Yap Mindemon, who had been arrested by the Germans and taken to a camp in Vught. Hurkos disguised himself as a German officer, went to Vught, introduced himself – in 'flawless German' – as 'Wehrmachtkapitan Robert Fischner' and told the camp commandant that the prisoner was needed at headquarters for questioning. The Germans swallowed this story, and took the psychic to Mindemon. Then, the fake Wehrmacht officer received an ESP warning. Mindemon would assume that Hurkos had really gone over to the enemy side and denounce him as a traitor, thereby giving the game away. Hurkos had no choice except to play the part of the beastly Nazi. Cursing, he hit and kicked Yap until the poor fellow



Above: the camp where Hurkos, disguised as a German officer, allegedly succeeded in freeing a Dutch prisoner. Although the incident remains undocumented, Hurkos's own dramatic account of the adventure and the brilliant way in which he apparently carried off the impersonation suggests he was cut out for the stage, even Hollywood. This is, indeed, where he has ended up

Top: Peter Hurkos, in the room in which movie star Sharon Tate was murdered, helping the police with their enquiries. Charles Manson was later convicted of the massacre, which claimed the lives of Sharon Tate and four of her friends. Hurkos said three men were responsible – in fact, three women and one man were involved

became unconscious. The soldiers carried the prisoner to the staff car that the camp commandant had kindly put at 'Robert Fischner's' disposal. 'Arrogantly I slid behind the wheel and drove through the gates of the camp as fast as I could,' the psychic recalls.

There are good reasons for dismissing this story as fictitious. First, because it is contrary to everything we know about how the highly organised and bureaucratic Nazi war machine operated. Second, because the files of the Vught camp, which are preserved at the State Institute for War Archives, do not contain the slightest indication that such a sensational escape ever took place. And third, because a Dutchman whose German was sufficiently 'flawless' to fool a German camp commandant would not have introduced himself as 'Wehrmachtkapitan'. In the German Wehrmacht, such people were not called 'Kapitan', but 'Hauptmann'!

At the end of the war, Hurkos started to give clairvoyant stage performances in the Hague, assisted by his brother, a professional showman. His specialities were 'object readings' – psychometry – and describing pictures blindfold. It is alleged that he made many striking 'hits'. However, a magician would be unlikely to find these successes inexplicable. And Hurkos failed miserably when, around 1947, he was tested by the Belgian scientist Professor Albert Bessemans, a critical investigator of paranormal claims and an expert in several forms of legerdemain.

From the many verbatim accounts of Hurkos's stage performances, it is obvious that he employs the sleight-of-hand of the stage clairvoyant. Subjects are confronted with ambiguously worded (and, thanks to Hurkos's thick Dutch accent, ambiguously pronounced) general statements in such circumstances that they will inevitably project a 'meaningful' interpretation onto them. Afterwards, the 'good sitters' selectively remember what went on.

His clairvoyance explained?

In an article in the *Skeptical Inquirer* Ronald Schwartz presents and analyses transcripts of a typical Hurkos seance that formed part of a radio broadcast. This example demonstrates his technique.

> Hurkos: 'One, two, three, four, five – I see five in the family.'
> Sitter: 'That's right. There are four of us and Uncle Raymond, who often stays with us.'

Another example is as follows:

> Hurkos: 'One, two, three, four, five – how many people are in the family, sir?'
> Sitter: 'Six.'
> Hurkos: 'Five besides you.'
> Sitter: 'Five besides me, yeh.'

Childish as this may seem, it is a very effective technique. 'One, two, three, four, five' applies to a great many different situations. Hurkos does not specify what he means. The specification is provided by the sitter, and the psychic gets the credit. A couple with five children? A hit. A couple with three children? A hit. A couple with four children? That is 'five besides me', also a hit. A couple with two children plus a dog? Well, Hurkos even saw that we have a dog! If the number of actual members of the family is too small, the sitter may help Hurkos by mentioning dead relatives, lodgers or frequent visitors. Or Hurkos may smile and

intimate that another child is under way. If even that does not work, the psychic may indicate that, in fact, he was referring to the sitter's parental home – with or without an Uncle Raymond! In the unlikely case that nothing can be made to fit, Hurkos will simply change the subject.

Around 1950, Peter Hurkos made a vain attempt to conquer Britain. His psychic show was previewed by experienced psychical researchers, notably Dr Eric John Dingwall, who saw nothing suggesting paranormal powers.

The British were amused, but hardly impressed, with Hurkos's attempts to solve the riddle of the theft of the Stone of Scone from Westminster Abbey in December 1950. It had been suspected from the start that the stone had been stolen by Scottish nationalists and taken away to Scotland. Hurkos was of the same opinion. Clairvoyance told him that the stone was hidden in Glasgow. He went there, but did not find it. Small wonder, for the Stone of Scone turned out to have been hidden in a ruined abbey in Arbroath, some 80 miles (130 kilometres) from Glasgow. Hurkos and his biographer, Norma Lee Browning, have repeatedly claimed that, in the Stone of Scone case, the psychic scored a number of striking hits that were later 'covered up' by the embarrassed authorities. Scotland Yard has formally denied that Hurkos or any other clairvoyant was of any help. The Dutch newspapers were able to have a good laugh at Hurkos's expense when, returning from Britain, Hurkos ran into unforeseen trouble. At Schiphol Airport, the Dutch customs searched his luggage and discovered a fair amount of contraband. 'My powers never seem to work when I try to use them on my own behalf,' the psychic sheepishly admitted when, 13 years later, something similar happened in the United States.

When the Stone of Scone was stolen from its resting place beneath the Chair in the Chapel of Edward the Confessor (above) in Westminster Abbey (right), the incident generated a great deal of public interest. The police were besieged with calls from psychics and clairvoyants who claimed to know where the relic had been hidden. Peter Hurkos came to Britain and, using his psychic powers, suggested the police try looking in Glasgow. The Stone was eventually found some 80 miles (130 kilometres) from there in Arbroath

The million dollar question

These facts prompt the question, does Peter Hurkos have any paranormal powers at all? The author has investigated several of his supposed prize cases. The results of this research throw suspicion on the claim that he ranks 'from 87 per cent to 99 per cent accuracy in his psychic projections'.

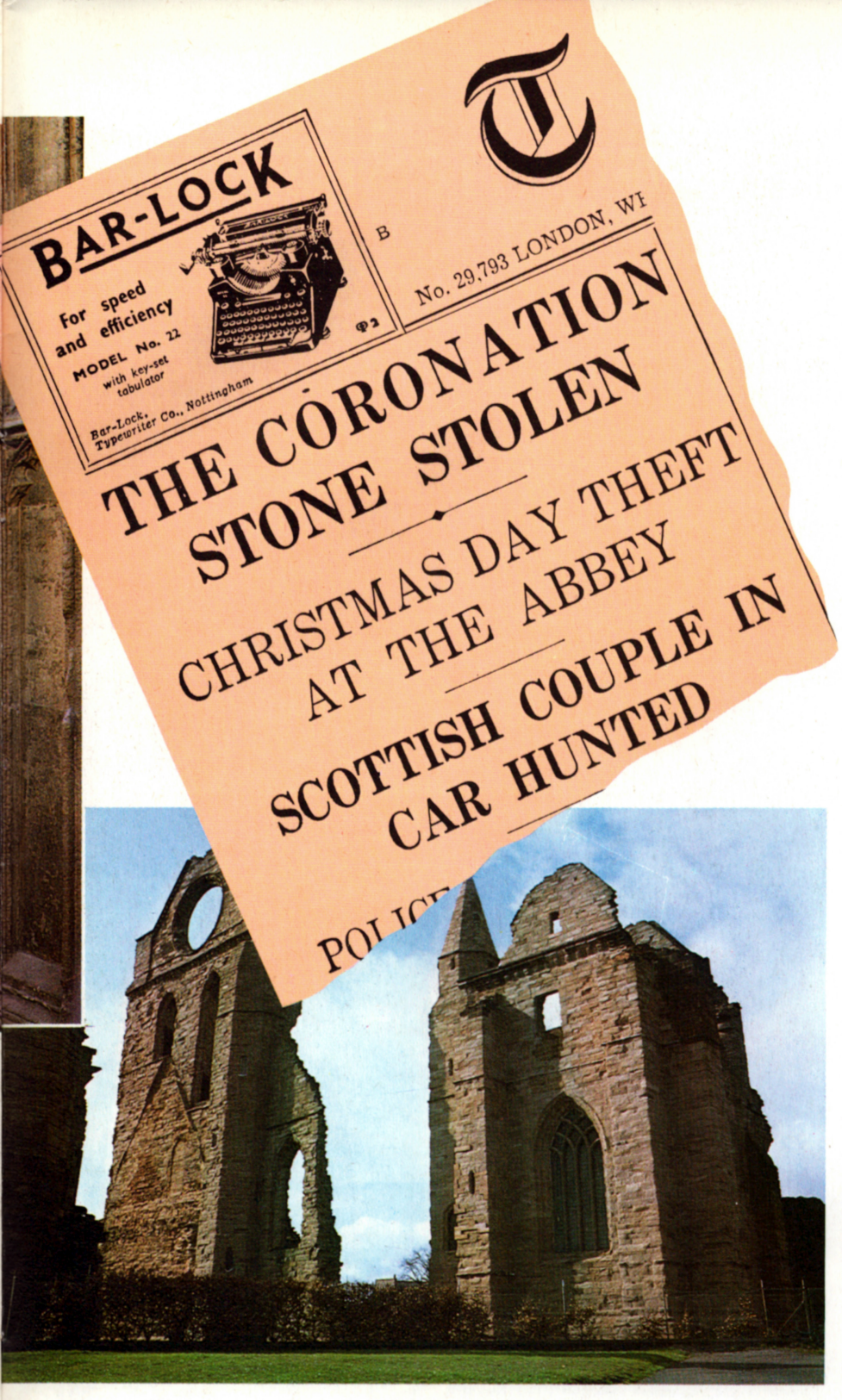
Consider the following case, reported in Nat Freedland's *The occult explosion*:

> Peter received a written commendation from the Pope for helping solve the murder of a priest in Amsterdam – and, incidentally, for not revealing that the murderess was mother of the priest's illegitimate child.

No date is given. We know, however, that Hurkos began his career as a psychic detective after the Second World War. In January 1982 I discussed the case with the Reverend Rector Solleveld, who was from 1945 to 1964 secretary to the Roman Catholic diocese of Haarlem, of which Amsterdam is a part. Rector Solleveld told me that the claim could not possibly be true, for the simple reason that no priest had been murdered in Amsterdam since the war. 'As the secretary to the bishop I would certainly have heard of such an incident,' he told me. 'It is also highly unlikely that the Pope would have written a commendation without having informed the diocese.' The Reverend Landsdaal, Rector Solleveld's successor as diocesal secretary, confirmed this. And so did the Amsterdam police, who knew nothing about a murder in which the victim had been a priest.

His greatest triumph

By all accounts, Peter Hurkos's most impressive single feat has been, as Nat Freedland put it, that of 'psychically detecting a rich young firebug who'd been considered above suspicion in the investigation of a rash of arsons.' This case features in almost every book or article ever written about Hurkos. The facts – as reported – are astonishing indeed. The account in the autobiography is as follows. In August 1951, the farmers in the area around the Dutch city of Nijmegen were terrorised by an outbreak of arson. The cost of the damage soon amounted to a total of over £100,000. Two hundred men continually patrolled the countryside, but they could



Top: the front page headlines carried by the *Daily Telegraph* on 27 December 1950. It would have been an excellent publicity coup if Hurkos had managed to pinpoint where the Stone had been taken. In fact, he and his biographer claim he came very near to doing just that but, they say, the authorities later, in their embarrassment, 'covered up' the fact

not prevent the mysterious pyromaniac striking time and again. Peter Hurkos offered his assistance. At first, the police were reluctant to co-operate. They had second thoughts when Hurkos proved his talent by accurately describing the contents of police chief Cammaert's pockets. The psychic was taken to the burnt-out farms. In one of these he found a key. The moment he touched it he had a crystal-clear vision of the perpetrator of the crimes: a tall boy, 15 to 16 years of age, a former employee of a baker's shop.

The police asked him if he could pick out the suspect if they showed him pictures of all the town boys. At the police office, Hurkos was given 'the high-school yearbooks' of the Nijmegen schools for the preceding five years. When he pointed to the suspect he had 'seen' psychically the police refused to believe him. Hurkos had selected the portrait of Piet Vierboom, the 17-year-old son of a rich and respected Nijmegen family. 'It can't be,' the police chief exclaimed. 'The family is one of the finest in Nijmegen!' Nevertheless, Piet Vierboom was brought in for interrogation. He denied the charges until Hurkos took over the questioning. The boy could not resist the psychic's piercing glance. 'I cannot lie to *you*. Yes, I did it,' he cried.

The only problem with this remarkable account is that it is not true. The original documents that I have been able to consult tell a very different story.

The prime suspect

The police actually started to suspect Piet Vierboom, the mentally deranged son of an Ooijpolder farmer, soon after the arson attacks began. Piet was a likely suspect because two months previously a mysterious fire had raged at Van Mook's bakery in the village of Bemmel, where the boy was employed. On that occasion, however, the evidence against Piet was not strong enough to warrant an arrest. However, the police remembered the incident on 12 August, when the rash of arsons in the Ooijpolder area broke out. They discovered that the fires coincided with Piet's holiday, which he spent at his parental home. Moreover, on 14 August they found sweet-wrappings at the site of one of the fires. Investigation revealed that Piet had recently bought a considerable quantity of that particular brand of sweets at the local confectioner's shop.

The public prosecutor, Baron Speijart van Woerden, had Piet arrested on 17 August. After the first interrogation, little doubt remained about the boy being responsible for the arson attacks that had been reported throughout the area.

As for Peter Hurkos's contribution: his attempts to help solve the case began only on 18 August, a day after Piet Vierboom's arrest. At his own request, he was allowed to give a demonstration of 'psychic powers' at the Nijmegen police office. A policeman (who had been present at the interrogation of the suspect!) showed Hurkos a photograph of the Vierboom family. Hurkos picked out Piet all right. ESP? The well-known technique of 'muscle reading' – reading the tiny muscular movements that indicate involuntary reactions – seems perhaps a more likely explanation. Baron Speijart was not impressed. 'I cannot imagine that Peter Hurkos's performance had any scientific value whatsoever,' he wrote afterwards. Time and again, the Nijmegen arson affair has been hailed as Peter Hurkos's clairvoyant masterpiece. But the real facts of the case are less than worthy of a psychic superstar.

Southcott: taking the lid off

The Southcottians survived – despite an over-zealous and well-publicised attempt to walk on water and the grim repercussions of a fatal circumcision. Besides, they still had, they claimed, Joanna Southcott's mysterious box. FRANK SMYTH investigates

MELBOURNE HOUSE is a large building of Yorkshire millstone grit, standing aloof in its own grounds on the lip of the motorway between Wakefield and Bradford. Its boundary walls bear the hallmarks of early Victorian squirearchy; neat notices, carved into the grey stone like epitaphs, warn: 'No hawkers', 'No vagrants' and, much more alarmingly, 'Beware man-traps'.

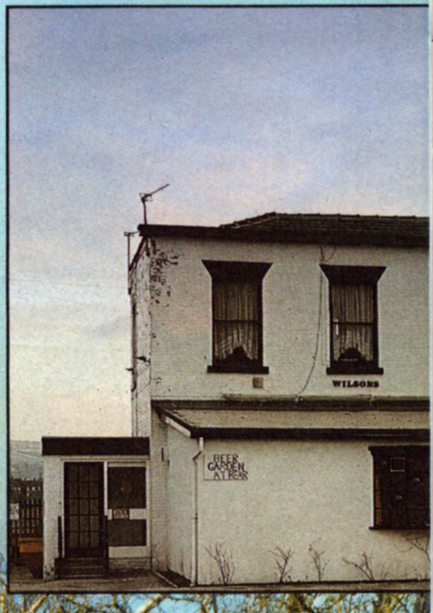
But the house was built by no ordinary country gentleman. John Wroe was the most bizarre of all Joanna Southcott's eccentric followers – part buffoon, part 'terrible patriarch', to quote a contemporary newspaper – but he had more personal charisma than even Southcott herself. Today Melbourne House is still known locally as 'Prophet Wroe's Mansion'.

Wroe saw his duties, outlined to him by an angelic guide, as an obligation to 'preach to the Jews'. In the first eight years of his 'ministry' he travelled first to Liverpool and then to London, where he delivered a message to Queen Charlotte, and then went on to Gibraltar, Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Scotland and Wales. His energy was prodigious, for he travelled mostly on foot, interspersing his foreign trips with bouts of fiery evangelicalism at home.

His peculiarities grew more noticeable as time passed. First he ordered the Southcottians to discard the names of months, numbering them instead. Then he began to grow his beard, demanding that all his male disciples do likewise. He made two highly publicised attempts to walk on water – first, in August 1823, on the river Aire near Kirkstall Abbey, Leeds, and secondly, in February of the following year, on the Lyne, near Ashton. When his attempts failed hilariously, he hastily announced that he had been undergoing a 'public baptism'.

Certainly Wroe had the courage of his strange convictions; on 17 April 1823 he was publicly circumcised at a meeting of believers, and was strong enough to proclaim – and show evidence of – the fact at a packed open-air meeting at Ashton-under-Lyne the following day. But the incident had tragic repercussions. One of his disciples, Henry Lees of Ashton, circumcised an infant named Daniel Grimshaw, who bled to death as a result. During the outcry that followed Wroe deemed it politic to disappear for a fortnight.

But despite the Grimshaw incident – Lees was tried and acquitted of manslaughter the following March – Ashton-under-Lyne and nearby Manchester proved for a while to be a goldmine for 'Prophet' Wroe. An elaborate 'sanctuary' was furnished for him at Charlestown, in Ashton, by his followers, and on Christmas Day 1825 a more elaborate one, with a fine organ, was opened at a cost of £9500. It was designed to resemble a theatre – indeed for years after Wroe's death it was the Hippodrome music hall, and more recently was re-opened as the Tameside



Bottom: Melbourne house in Yorkshire, which is still known locally as 'Prophet Wroe's Mansion' after John Wroe, the eccentric Southcottian leader. His sexual proclivities led to him being tried in what is now a public house called The Odd Whim (below)

Theatre – and had an 'unclean' pew where women accused of 'unchastity' sat during services. After the service they were taken to a 'cleansing room' beneath the pulpit, where they were stripped naked, then whipped by the prophet with a birch rod. At each cardinal point on the outskirts of the town a square building was erected, marking the four gates of a temple, planned along the lines of the temple at Jerusalem, of which the sanctuary was to form the centre. One of these, in which Wroe's 'trial' was held, is now a public house appropriately named The Odd Whim.

Wroe's trial came about as a result of his

sexual tendencies, although the charge of 'swindler' was also levelled at him. In 1827 a 12-year-old girl, Martha Whitley, accused him of having had intercourse with her. At first Wroe denied the charge, but when three years later three more young girls accused him of sexual interference during the 'cleansing' ceremonies, he was called to answer. According to the *Dictionary of national biography* of 1917, although Wroe was obsessed by sex 'there is not a tittle of immoral teaching'.

However, after the trial – an unruly proceeding by all accounts – 'a very considerable number of [the Southcottians] left him and shaved off their beards', including Henry Lees, the over-enthusiastic circumciser. Wroe was never welcome in Ashton again, although for 40 years afterwards many of his followers were to be found in the town. They included several shopkeepers, who wore long straggling beards and tall felt hats, closed their shops for 24 hours from 6 p.m. on Fridays, and were known as 'Joannas'.

The charge of 'swindling' was almost certainly true. In 1856, Wroe ordered his followers to wear gold rings; but although they paid for gold, they were issued with rings made of brass. And in 1842 when his printing shop at Wrenthorpe, Wakefield, was broken into by burglars, Wroe's perjury convicted three innocent people, a fact that came to light only when the real culprits were caught five years later.

But the setback at Ashton did not disturb the prophet. His 'breakaway' group of Southcottians became known as 'Christian Israelites', and to their practices of beards and circumcision Wroe added adherence to a strict kosher diet.

'Beardies' down under

In Australia, where Joanna Southcott's influence had already been vicariously felt, Wroe became hugely popular after his first extended visit in 1843 – his followers there were known as 'beardies'. His Melbourne congregation collected the £10,000 with which he built Melbourne House, 'dedicating' it at sunrise on Whit Sunday 1857. Since the Second World War it has been an old people's home.

Wroe's final prophecy had the same germ of truth as that of Joanna Southcott; in the 1840s he had forecast that the Millennium would begin in 1863 – but on 5 February of that year he died suddenly after breaking his collar bone, at Collingwood, Melbourne, and was buried there.

No portrait exists of Wroe, for unlike Southcott he thought such things sinful. Possibly his appearance had something to do with the omission, for he was described as having a 'savage, haggard look', with a 'hump back and very prominent nose' – to which was added long shaggy hair and beard and a big misshapen hat.

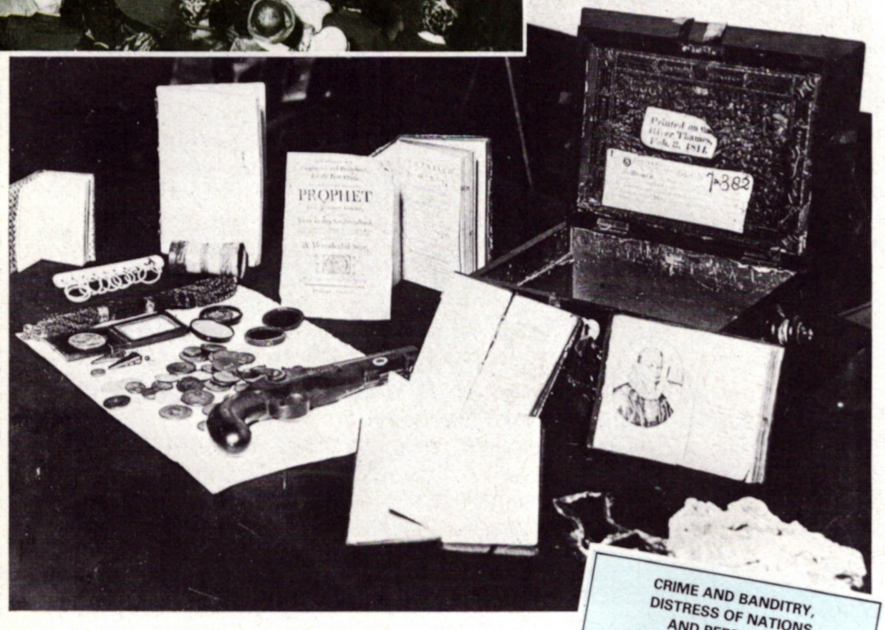
Below: the grandiose 'House of Jezreel' near Gillingham in Kent, built by an ex-Indian army officer, James White, with funds collected from the Southcottian faithful. It was to be a refuge for believers, but fell into disrepair after the death of White – or 'J. Jezreel' as he called himself – in the 1880s. The house was finally demolished in 1904

'There must have been some strange fascination about the man,' wrote a late-Victorian commentator, 'for his utterances are but fatuous insipidities with a Biblical twang, having neither the pathetic earnestness of Joanna Southcott nor the crude originality of her other improver, John Ward.'

After Wroe's death the Southcottians pursued their beliefs quietly for about 10 years. Then, in 1874, a powder barge exploded under a bridge in Regent's Park. The debris was hurled for hundreds of yards, one

Above: the scene of the disaster in 1874 when a powder barge exploded under a bridge on Regent's Canal, London. One enormous piece of debris struck Joanna Southcott's tombstone – which was hundreds of yards away – giving a new and curious twist to its inscription, which read 'Thou wilt appear in greater power'

Left: the famous psychical researcher Harry Price prepares to open 'Joanna Southcott's box' before a large audience in 1927. Its contents (below) proved to be disappointing – a miscellany of objects seemingly unconnected with either Joanna Southcott or even religion. However, there are those who believe Price's 'grand opening' to have been nothing more than another publicity stunt and that the box was not Joanna Southcott's at all

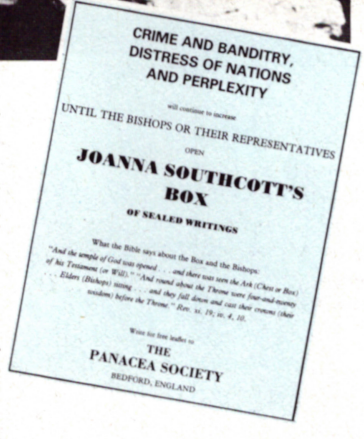


huge piece shattering Joanna's tombstone in St John's Wood, with its inscription: 'Thou wilt appear in greater power.'

This event inspired an ex-Indian Army soldier, James White, with the idea that Joanna's resurrection was imminent. For 10 years he and his wife collected funds from the scattered Southcottians of Australia, the United States and Canada in order to build a huge brick fortress known as the 'House of Jezreel' at Gillingham, Kent, in which the faithful would live with White and his wife. However, the ex-soldier soon decided that he himself was 'Jezreel'. But 'J. Jezreel' – as he signed himself – was not to reign long; and when both he and his wife died in the 1880s, financial chaos ensued for the Southcottians.

Faith in the 'Second Coming' still remained firm, however. It was remembered that Joanna herself had spoken of the Millennium beginning in the 'fourth year after the first decade of the century'; when she died in 1814, this prophecy was thought to have been fulfilled. Now, with the 20th century looming, her followers decided that it might, after all, refer to 1914.

The last 'prophet' to appear was a highly respectable lady named Helen Exeter, who founded the Panacea Society in the first decade of the 20th century to study Joanna Southcott's works anew. By a strange coincidence, Helen Exeter drowned in the all-important year, 1914, when the Channel packet *Galway Castle* was torpedoed – so again the Southcottians' flagging faith was revived. This time the reins fell into the hands of Rachel Fox and 'Octavia', the pseudonymous widow of a Church of England clergyman, and it was they, in fact, who first mentioned 'Joanna Southcott's Box'. According to Mrs Fox, Joanna had left a sealed and corded box of writings that was to be opened solemnly by the 24 Bishops of England and Wales, meeting in convocation. When it was opened, she proclaimed, such things as 'crime, distress and banditry' would disappear from the land.


CRIME AND BANDITRY,
DISTRESS OF NATIONS
AND PERPLEXITY

will continue to increase

UNTIL THE BISHOPS OR THEIR REPRESENTATIVES

OPEN

JOANNA SOUTHCOTT'S
BOX

OF SEALED WRITINGS

What the Bible says about the Box and the Bishops:

"And the temple of God was opened . . . and there was seen the Ark (Chest or Box) of his Testament (or Will)." "And round about the Throne were four-and-twenty . . . Elders (Bishops) sitting . . . and they fell down and cast their crowns (their wisdom) before the Throne." Rev. xi. 19; iv. 4, 10.

Write for free leaflet to

THE
PANACEA SOCIETY
BEDFORD, ENGLAND

Above: today's Southcottians are based at Bedford, and are noted for their respectability. From time to time they publish advertisements such as this one about the opening of Joanna's box – and the grim future that is in store for mankind if it is not opened before a convocation of bishops. But the whereabouts of the box remains a secret

Boxing clever

She stated that the spirits of the seven 'prophets' – Richard Brothers, Joanna Southcott, William Sharp (who had, however, never proclaimed himself a prophet), George Turner, John Wroe, 'J. Jezreel' and Helen Exeter – were linked together to guide the Church of England onto new and wiser paths. The key to their guidance lay in the mysterious box, and she and 'Octavia' began a vociferous campaign to attract the interest of the bishops. In May 1923, for instance, a group of Southcottians paraded around Plymouth with placards that proclaimed: 'earthquakes, plague, and thunder will soon startle England unless the Bishops open Joanna Southcott's Box.'

Some 20 conditions were laid down regarding the 'opening', but no light was shed on the box's whereabouts: 'The exact location of the box is known to a lady who has seen the box herself and, upon hearing from the Bishops, will put them into contact with the intermediary, who will supply the custodian's name and address.'

In 1927 the psychical researcher Harry Price claimed to have been given secret access to the box. It proved, he alleged, to contain nothing but an old nightcap, a flintlock pistol and various other oddments that bore no obvious relationship to religion or even to Joanna Southcott personally. Her supporters maintain that whatever Price opened, it was not Joanna's box.

Today the Bedford-based Panacea Society shun publicity. According to local newspapers they are 'bastions of Church of England respectability' – their honorary secretary is a professor of engineering – and, beyond claiming that 'there is indeed a box', they remain silent on the subject.

But whether there is a box or not, the influence of the Devonshire milkmaid and her 'pathetic earnestness' have endured surprisingly well for nearly 200 years – a record that her many avid detractors could never, surely, have prophesied.

Post script

Your letters to THE UNEXPLAINED

Dear Sir,
The Unexplained must be congratulated for the coverage given to the recent wave of catastrophist explanations for much that is puzzling in the geological and historical record. The articles on Velikovsky's *Worlds in collision* [issue 60], Warlow's *The reversing Earth* [issue 84] and Clube and Napier's *The cosmic serpent* [issue 118] were fair and accurate reports of ideas that have rarely been satisfactorily covered in the established scientific journals.

As mentioned in the article on Clube and Napier, the Society for Interdisciplinary Studies was established specifically to promote research by specialists into such fascinating theories (indeed Dr Clube, Immanuel Velikovsky and Peter Warlow have all contributed to the society's journal); any reader who wishes to pursue these ideas in greater depth is invited to send for further information to the SIS, 12 Dorset Road, Merton Park, London SW19.

The idea that global catastrophes caused by extra-terrestrial bodies have occurred in historical times seems increasingly likely to move to the centre of the scientific stage over the next few years, and I look forward to *The Unexplained* continuing its coverage of such developments.
Yours faithfully,
Brian Moore (Chairman, SIS)

Dear Sir,
About a month or so before Christmas 1982 I was walking past our local woods with my four-year-old son when I swear I spotted a puma. It was about 30 yards [27 metres] from me and some 20 yards [18 metres] from the main road.

The puma was calmly walking towards me; it was so real that I picked up a large stick and pushed my son behind me just in case the animal attacked us. However, the creature turned off the path and seemed to vanish into thin air.

I did not report the incident to anyone for fear of seeming mad; the only people I told were my wife and parents – and I expect they had a good laugh at my expense. I was reassured, however, to read in issue 114 of *The Unexplained* that others have had strange experiences of this nature. I know that I saw a puma (my parents actually own one) – but why did it seem to disappear so suddenly?
Yours faithfully,
V. Wobsehall Doncaster

Dear Sir,
A family I once knew experienced a haunting that bore close resemblances to Matthew Manning's encounter with the ghost of Robert Webbe, which (as you describe in issue 127) involved people from the past and the present seeming to be aware of one another.

The family moved into an old house with an overrun orchard and a disused well, just north of York. There were two children, neither of whom was particularly imaginative, both under the age of 10. Their parents were worried that they had no close neighbours, fearing that their children might feel isolated and lonely, but the children said they had 'Robert William' to play with. He had, apparently, come up to them as they were sitting on the edge of the well, just a few days after they had moved into the house, and said: 'Hello, my name's Robert William and I'm nine. You mustn't go near the well, it's dangerous. What game shall we play?'

The parents were a little disconcerted that both children had decided to create an imaginary playmate but relieved that 'he' showed such good sense about the well. As time went by the children talked incessantly about 'Robert William': how odd his clothes were – such funny thick boots and long socks and long 'short' trousers – and how strange the games were that he insisted they played. The children were very keen to invite their playmate to tea, and eventually their parents decided to allow it.

On the day of the tea the children went out to fetch 'Robert William', but he said he couldn't come – he had to stay near the well. They had pleaded with him, but he sadly refused to leave his 'post'. Then the children noticed that their mother was as white as a sheet: she had caught a glimpse through the kitchen window of a strange little boy standing by the well; he fitted perfectly the children's description.

After she recovered, the mother sent out some food to the boy, but it came back uneaten. He was nowhere to be seen for a few days, but when he did come back to the well she often saw him. Her husband never did, but once heard him speaking to the children and once heard a boy's voice say 'hello' to him as he walked past the well.

It was perfectly clear to them that the child was from another time – the Edwardian era, almost certainly. He seemed solid enough, but he was a ghost – yet no one felt frightened in his presence.

The family had to move house yet again and, on the day they left, they all solemnly trooped out to the well. Although they couldn't see the boy, they said: 'We're sorry but we have to leave now. Goodbye.' And a voice said: 'Goodbye – I shall miss you.'

Once they had left, the mother made some enquiries. A little boy called Robert William had drowned in that well in 1910. He was obviously determined not to let anyone else do the same.
Yours faithfully,
Pam Lakes Lincoln

Dear Sir,
About 20 years ago two friends and I visited a medium, and she told me that I would leave my house and live in a crescent. After saying this she corrected herself and said: 'No! It's more like a horseshoe.'

I did move house, but as my new home was in a straight street, I dismissed the prophecy as an error. Then, 18 years after the reading I inherited a bungalow; it was on a small estate, which was built in an almost perfect horseshoe.

I don't think the medium's prophecy can have been a question of mindreading as the estate wasn't built until the 1970s.
(*Name and address supplied*)

In 18 years it isn't really very surprising that a prediction like this should come true – especially since the event is not of a very unusual kind.

Send *your* letters to THE UNEXPLAINED, Orbis House, 20–22 Bedfordbury, London WC2N 4BT

With a little help...

Psychical phenomena are notoriously elusive, even when obviously induced by a psychically gifted person such as a Spiritualist medium. However, the parapsychologist Kenneth J. Batcheldor has pioneered a method of eliciting paranormal phenomena from groups of ordinary, non-psychic people, which has proved amazingly successful. But it remains controversial – because it involves deception

A talking dolphin called 'Silk', a mysterious entity called 'Lilith' and the now famous 'Philip' (see page 1021) have all, allegedly, communicated with Canadian 'sitter groups' since the early 1970s. Although they are not directly connected with the researches of Kenneth J. Batcheldor and his partner Colin Brookes-Smith (see page 2478), it seems unlikely that the groups concerned were not inspired by them. And several British groups continue to flourish, using Batcheldor's guide-lines.

There is abundant evidence that genuine, large-scale psychokinesis (PK) eventually occurs at such sitter groups, yet the method by which it is encouraged to happen causes raised eyebrows among parapsychologists who are nervous about their 'scientific' reputations.

The target object at all of these groups is an ordinary table; the aim is to make it levitate, first with the members of the group touching it lightly, then – ideally – without any human contact.

Although this activity sounds very similar to Victorian or Edwardian parlour games, Batcheldor stresses that '. . . the new approach seeks to transform what was once an amusement to some, and the dawn of a new religion [Spiritualism] to others, into a scientific experiment.'

Basically, Batcheldor's 'new approach' is an ingenious – sceptics might say an ingenuous – way of utilising the power of belief, even if such belief is founded on erroneous assumptions, in order to precipitate genuine paranormal events. For example, as the four, five or six sitters of a group – none of them Spiritualists or believers necessarily in any power other than that of the human subconscious – sit in darkness with their hands resting slightly on the top of a table, they may begin to notice strange creaks and apparent movements of the table. Even if they are well-acquainted with the literature of psychical research a feeling of excitement may well up; something paranormal is happening!

The table may then rock, jump, tilt, even leap about the room or rise into the air – forcing the sitters (hands still lightly placed on its top) to stand up. On the whole, however, the first movements of the table are slight rocking or jerking movements in one or another direction. A sceptic may well point out that, in darkness or near-darkness, anyone could have shoved the table, either deliberately or accidentally. But Batcheldor cheerfully allows for both situations in his theory and practice of what the Philip group have aptly termed 'PK by committee'.

The major catalysts in PK experiments, according to Batcheldor, are belief and expectation. And the best way to achieve both is, paradoxically, for something to happen that creates this frame of mind among the sitters. It may be an accidental muscular twitch that nudges the table, or a subtle – but deliberate – shove on the part of at least one of the sitters, that makes the table behave as if possessed. Batcheldor sees both situations as *encouragements* to the production of genuine paranormal phenomena and as such, perfectly valid as experimental protocol. Moreover, it seems to work.

The ethics of deception

Of course he and his scientific supporters, such as Julian Isaacs, insist on an ethical framework within which the members of the group must work. For example, the 'cheater' cannot confess to have deliberately knocked, shoved or even levitated the table until *after* the sitting – but then he or she *must* do so. It is the 'unclaimed' paranormal effects, which should, according to Batcheldor's theory, happen after the 'deliberate deception', that make it all worthwhile.

Paranormal incidents are notoriously 'shy' when sceptics are present but, in the atmosphere of – it must be said, almost superstitious – belief that a strangely rocking table creates, such bizarre events do indeed tend to proliferate. Reports from particularly successful 'Batcheldor' groups mention raps, scratching sounds, levitation of objects other than the table, and even strange voices.

Kenneth Batcheldor is a transparently honest researcher and is, as his reception at the SPR's centenary conference at Cambridge in 1982 showed, highly regarded in a world not known for its generosity of spirit towards its fellow researchers. However, his now famous 'approach' for sitter groups, for all its apparent success, does not endear him to the scientific purists who maintain, perhaps rightly, that cheating is simply that.